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Taking Care in the Digital Realm: Hmong Story Cloths and the Poverty of Interpretation on HmongEmbroidery.org¹

By Corey Hickner-Johnson²

Abstract

This essay examines Hmong story cloths exhibited on the HmongEmbroidery.org virtual museum in order to consider 1.) transnational Hmong diasporic experience post-Vietnam, 2.) the problems with interpretation as a critical mode of scholarship seeking mastery, and 3.) the work of digital archives in accounting for displacement and loss. The Hmong, an indigenous group originally living in East Asia, created many of the story cloths exhibited on HmongEmbroidery.org in Thai refugee camps following the Vietnam War, during which they assisted the United States CIA against the Viet Cong and Pathet Lao. Displaced by enemy forces from their homes through violent means and surviving in precarious conditions, Hmong women embroidered their stories onto cloth. Because Hmong language did not become an alphabet until the 1950s, and because traumatic accounts often exist outside of language, the story cloths largely remain uninterpretable, even as they account for Hmong experience. Interpreting the story cloths, in most cases, would only project exterior frames of reference onto their meanings. In this way, Hmong story cloths account for Hmong experience, history, and displacement while revealing the poverty of interpretation when taken up as a critical reading strategy assuming mastery. This essay reads closely in a descriptive mode, showing how HmongEmbroidery.org's story cloth exhibits demonstrate the importance and urgency of digital humanities projects that archive experiences of displacement and make them accessible to transnational audiences vis-à-vis the internet.

Keywords: Hmong, displacement, interpretation, digital humanities, embroidery

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Figure 1. Artist and year unknown. Portrays the Secret War in Laos. 46x54 cm.

Introduction

The object pictured is a Hmong *paj ntaub* or “story cloth” (fig. 1). Its actual size is 46x54 centimeters, and it is constructed by surface stitching with cotton thread onto a blue fabric background. Though its place of origin and artist cannot be verified, it is very likely that this story cloth was made by Hmong women refugees in Thailand’s Ban Vinai refugee camp, which is depicted in the bottom right of the cloth, in the 1980s-1990s. The Hmong are an indigenous group who originally lived in East Asia, particularly in the mountainous regions of Laos, Vietnam, and China. A people with a long history of displacement, the Hmong were uprooted from their homes in the 1970s during what Americans call the Vietnam War and what Hmong call the Secret War because of their CIA-endorsed support to United States troops. Led by General Vang Pao, Hmong forces worked with the CIA in Laos and Vietnam to defend United States troops and resist the communist Pathet Lao and Vietnamese Viet Cong.³ After the United States pulled out of the region in 1974-1975, the Hmong were left vulnerable to the enemy. An estimated sixty-five thousand or more Hmong were killed, and approximately one hundred thousand sought protection in Thailand, attempting the long mountainous journey to refugee camps. Nearly half died in their journey. The remaining Hmong survived in the camps, which were often sites of violence towards Hmong, where story cloths like the one portraying the Secret War in Laos were created (fig. 1).⁴ The story

³ For more on Gen. Vang Pao, see Xaykaothao.

⁴ For more on Hmong history, see Her and Buley-Meissner’s very helpful book, *Hmong and American*.

cloth accounts for Hmong experience of trauma and displacement during the Secret War. It also accounts for Hmong strength.

Though the Hmong have been creating fabric arts for thousands of years, Secret War era story cloths record Hmong displacement in unique ways. Because Hmong language did not become alphabetized until 1950, many Hmong refugees did not record their histories in writing.⁵ However, the Hmong did create story cloths as a means of recording and expressing both individual and collective experiences. Though perhaps unconventional texts—at least in Western terms—the story cloths hold and continue to produce rich meanings and accounts of Hmong history.⁶ In her memoir of Hmong American experience, *The Latehomecomer*, Kao Kalia Yang explains the significance of story cloths during her mother’s escape from North Vietnam: “...her mother gave her gifts—fine embroidery she had spent hours in the hot sun making, little pieces of cloth carefully lined with flowery symbols and connected squares that told the history of the Hmong people, a lost story, a narrative sewn but no longer legible” (17). Some scholars believe that the story cloths contain a special ancient script of Hmong experience hidden in the designs.⁷ However, for most, these meanings remain somewhat uninterpretable. Even Xai S. Lor, who is a Hmong paint artist and story cloth digital curator, speaks to the enigmatic quality of the story cloths: “Today, no one can decode these messages because the original language’s meaning has been lost” (Shah).⁸

Despite the story cloths’ enigma and absence of written language, Hmong experience is recorded in them through vivid threads, designs, and figures, as well as through oral stories and memory. Hmong story cloths show how meaning can exist and be conveyed without being interpretable—especially through cross-cultural and transnational frames of reference. In some cases, like the story cloths, meaning cannot be made simple or linear. While Hmong and non-Hmong scholars have worked to explain the cultural importance of story cloths for Hmong, and even to decode the cloths, the significance of uninterpretability and enigma in the cloths has not been explored.

The Hmong story cloth is one of 213 made digitally accessible to a viewing public through HmongEmbroidery.org, an online virtual textiles museum run by the Hmong Cultural Center and Hmong Archives, located in Saint Paul, MN (fig. 1). Though the color scheme of the story cloth is bright, the scene it depicts is one of tragedy, loss, and displacement. The Hmong are distinguished from uniformed-clad soldiers through their dress, which is depicted by a mainly black outfit accented by traditional Hmong colorfully embroidered clothing. In this way, the Hmong figures in the story cloth are marked and highlighted as Hmong through their vibrant and intricately sewn belts, skirts, hats, and baby carriers. A closer look reveals babies carried on women’s backs in flight and bodies shot dead by guns. The airplane in the upper left-hand corner is important to notice. The white lines around the airplane depict chemical agent T-2 Mycotoxin, commonly known as Yellow Rain, a form of chemical warfare used by Pathet Lao forces. Yellow

⁵ Though Dao Yang affirms that the Central Institute for Nationalities in Beijing houses an ancient Hmong book (54), writing in Hmong has been rarely documented until 1950, when Hmong became alphabetized.

⁶ There could be some debate over whether a story cloth or textile is a text. I consider story cloths as texts in the sense that their meanings change according to reader/viewer responses and that they are interlaced with social conditions, times, places, and people. See McGann on textuality and Grafton on Derridian notions of textiles and meaning. In addition, there is plenty of textile scholarship addressing this issue. See Daly Goggin and Fowkes Tobin, as well as Hemmings.

⁷ See HmongEmbroidery.org, Buley-Meissner, and Deacon and Calvin.

⁸ I will continue with first and last names in many cases, given that there are different people with the same last names cited in this essay.

Rain is known to cause illness, especially among children. Through Yellow Rain and other means, the Hmong were attacked and forced to escape from their homes during the Vietnam War because of their alliance with United States forces. The story cloth portrays the Hmong fleeing to the jungle and, for those who could, crossing the Mekong River, which is often called the “River of Death,” into Thailand, where they survived in the refugee camps. The Mekong, as depicted in this story cloth, holds about one-third of the Hmong shown, possibly accounting for losses of Hmong life.

The HmongEmbroidery.org virtual textiles museum works to digitally account for Hmong experience—both for Hmong and non-Hmong viewers. It exhibits knowledge at the same time that it exhibits gaps in knowledge. HmongEmbroidery.org charts displacement instead of place, flight instead of position, and loss instead of recovery—although the virtual museum itself does recover and collect important history and culture. Despite the fact that the story cloths encompass multiple elements—narrative, visual, and electronic—in their online textuality, they nevertheless remain somewhat unknowable, especially in a Western context. In other words, HmongEmbroidery.org is a digital archive that makes accounts of Hmong life accessible to a wide viewing public, even as its artifacts exhibit uninterpretable knowledge. This essay focuses on the problems of interpretation in digitized encounters with Hmong story cloths depicting Hmong displacement vis-à-vis HmongEmbroidery.org. What does HmongEmbroidery.org offer to our understandings of interpretation, digitized knowledge, and Hmong experience?

Over the past century, Western scholars have tried to interpret Hmong culture through their own frames of reference, inscribing countless misconceptions onto accounts of Hmong experience. This essay works to reframe many of those misconceptions by illuminating the importance of HmongEmbroidery.org as an archive that undoes damaging and negligent interpretations of Hmong culture and displacement. HmongEmbroidery.org is an example of a critical project falling under the category of “digital humanities” that might be lost in scholarly debates on neoliberalism and the digital humanities. As our world moves forward to technologically preserve human experience on the web—through social media, videos, open-access journals etc.—we, as scholars and citizens of the world, must take care to account for displaced and marginalized experiences in the digital realm, to face them without imposing our own interpretive and evaluative frames of reference, and to listen and view them on their own terms.

In this essay, I examine the story cloths on the HmongEmbroidery.org virtual website as an archive exhibiting Hmong knowledge, as well as gaps in knowledge. I argue for feminist scholarly approaches seeking to learn, rather than to master, when studying archives depicting loss and displacement. I consider the story cloths individually as well as their collectivity as an online museum on HmongEmbroidery.org. While Hmong story cloths have been studied as objects of translation and as fabric art, my work examines the story cloths as always somewhat untranslatable and uninterpretable.⁹ As HmongEmbroidery.org makes the story cloths accessible to an international audience, it upholds the enigmatic qualities of the story cloths, showing how accessibility can provide learning experiences but does not, and should not, promise mastery. My methodological framework is more about facing, as opposed to figuring out, as I show the poverty of interpretation as a reading strategy when studying archives of displacement and stories told without words. In fact, interpretation can sometimes be a rather poor method of scholarship. In this essay, I work with a reading strategy much like what Heather Love calls “close but not deep,” in order to describe, notice, and look closely as a form of analysis.

I am not at all advocating that attempts to better understand archives of displacement be foreclosed. In fact, I remain interested and supportive of recent gestures to make use of Hmong

⁹ See Peterson on translation and Buley-Meissner on materiality.

story cloths in historicizing Hmong experience.¹⁰ However, it is critical that scholars proceed in their studies on archives of displacement and trauma with the acknowledgement that such archives cannot be made whole through retrospective interpretation. As affect scholar Ann Cvetkovich explains, trauma can be “unspeakable and unrepresentable and because it is marked by forgetting and dissociation, it often seems to leave behind no records at all” (7). In other words, even without linguistic and written barriers, hindsight is not always twenty-twenty, especially in memories of trauma and particularly when one was not present in the first place. Still, trying to get closer to knowing, without assuming the possibility of mastery or comprehension, is important work.

Interpretation and Digital Humanities

As scholars, we are in the business of “knowledge production.” We produce knowledge through our critical lenses and interpretations of texts, cultures, and histories. With knowledge production as the end goal of research, it can be difficult to pursue a project that takes up unknowing or lack of interpretability as its mode of study. Is there a point to studying something—especially as a humanist and literary scholar—that cannot be fully interpreted? If we cannot or do not interpret, can we still learn something? Indeed, questions of interpretation and digitization lie at the heart of current humanities debates. With recent turns to digital humanities, approaches such as mapping, registering data, archiving, and building databases are becoming popular modes of scholarship. HmongEmbroidery.org might fit under the rubrics of digital humanities, although it is not university-housed. It is, however, funded in part by the National Endowment for the Humanities, which is a primary benefactor for university digital humanities projects in the United States. The virtual museum is supervised by the Hmong Cultural Center and the Hmong Archives, both located in Saint Paul, MN, USA, and it was funded in 2012 by a \$10,000 grant, written by Hmong Cultural Center Librarian Mark Pfeifer, from the National Endowment for the Arts and an approximately \$3,000 grant from the Asian Pacific Endowment of the St. Paul Foundation. The story cloths themselves come from the Hmong Archives and personal collections. They are exhibited through photos taken by HmongEmbroidery.org curator and translator Xai S. Lor and Noah Vang. Compared to many university digital humanities projects, HmongEmbroidery.org receives little material support. In fact, HmongEmbroidery.org as a project has not received any funding since 2012, and yet, it still exists. Many improvements could be made to the archive in order to make it more digitally accessible. Zooming features and higher picture resolution could heighten the viewer experience and allow for closer study. However, these improvements cannot be made without people and money. HmongEmbroidery.org, an archive of displacement, is a critical and illuminating example of the importance, and even urgency, of material and immaterial support for such archives.

As current debates reveal, while supporters of digital humanities appreciate the accessibility of information, as well as technical modes of humanities scholarship, critics worry that digital humanities projects support a neoliberal system and a post- or even anti-interpretive stance to humanities work. A recent discussion in the *Los Angeles Review of Books* demonstrates these tensions. Daniel Allington, Sarah Brouillette, and David Golumbia worry that the “unparalleled level of material support that digital humanities has received suggests that its most significant contribution to academic politics may lie in its (perhaps unintentional) facilitation of

¹⁰ As cited in Mary Louise Buley-Meissner’s chapter, “scholars at the Third International Conference on Hmong Studies recently raised the possibility that *paj ntaub* designs could be used by scholars to reinterpret the past, including the History of Hmong migration in Asia” (242).

the neoliberal takeover of the university,” and that digital humanities work is often “anti-interpretive” and apolitical (Allington et al.). In their response to Allington et al., Juliana Spahr, Richard So, and Andrew Piper explain that “there is a tremendous amount of new scholarship being produced in [digital humanities] that seeks to answer significant research questions, and a great deal of this work directly addresses issues related to race, gender, class, and power” (Spahr et al.).

HmongEmbroidery.org unsteadies some of the assumptions made in Allington et al.’s case. Arguments like theirs assume three things: first, that interpretation is always primary and possible in humanities scholarship; second, that the initial digital project has decent funding; and third, that the singular project is an ending point—when, in fact, it can be a starting point for subsequent scholars to do more work, as this essay does. HmongEmbroidery.org shows us how interpretation can be a limiting and even obscuring, mode of study, how important digital projects often operate with very little material support, and how digital projects that map and exhibit can work as catalysts for even more scholarship on their subjects. In projects like HmongEmbroidery.org—a virtual museum accounting for loss, displacement, and a lost or never existing written alphabet, as well as a particularly Hmong experience—interpretation or knowing in a hermeneutic sense falls short. Interpretation, here, especially through a non-Hmong frame of reference, becomes imposing and even facile. As Rita Feskli explains, “To interpret something is to add one’s voice to that of the text: to negotiate, appropriate, elaborate, translate, and relate” (741). In this virtual museum, there is no guarantor of knowledge: most of the story cloths’ makers are either unknown or dead, and even Xai S. Lor, their Hmong curator, who is an artist himself, demonstrates through his story cloth descriptions how the inability to interpret and unknowability of the story cloths is worth preserving in many cases.

Another unnamed story cloth by an unknown author on HmongEmbroidery.org depicts a mermaid scene, which is puzzling to Lor, as mermaids do not typically appear in Hmong mythology (fig. 2). Explaining that “it is uncertain what the artist was thinking when she made this particular piece,” Lor keeps the mystery of the story cloth intact through his analysis and curation. While he goes on to theorize different meanings—that the story cloth depicts reincarnation or that it is a love story—Lor refuses to provide an ultimate interpretation of the story cloth at hand. Lor, who is currently working on his MFA in painting, explains in an email conversation that many of the cloths resonate with Hmong oral traditions, which he heard and used to recite with his elders, primarily his mother. Lor stated that he “experienced and witnessed” his grandmother, mother, and other Hmong women making the story cloths. Encountering the story cloths, then, is less about dissecting the story and more about telling, making, listening, and experiencing the cloth and story with others. Lor describes these acts as a form of Hmong knowledge that “an outsider from the Hmong community would not be able to [know] because they don’t have the experiences” (Lor). The experience and witness of Hmong story cloths has been especially meaningful and formative in Lor’s life as a way of knowing, even without applying interpretative strategies.



Figure 2. Artist and year unknown. 27x25cm.

To be clear: I am not arguing that HmongEmbroidery.org is resistant to interpretation. A Foucauldian framing of the story cloths implying resistance only centers Western interpretations and puts the story cloths on the outside as resisters. The Hmong have borne enough resistance for the United States through their allegiance during Vietnam, which cost tens of thousands their lives and homes. I propose that instead of positioning marginalized archives that are difficult to interpret as resisters, we position them in the center of our conversations. In doing so, we approach the archive with an ethics that seeks to not skew, obscure, or inscribe majoritarian logics onto the archive itself. HmongEmbroidery.org reveals the poverty of interpretation as a mode of study. Interpretation, here, only produces a false sense of mastery and knowledge.

HmongEmbroidery.org is one such digital humanities project that seeks to “preserve and promote the voices of social groups otherwise under-represented or erased in scholarship” (Spahr, So, and Piper), and in doing so, it generates even more scholarship and inquiry. A mode of reading that acknowledges and seeks to understand more about the story cloths on their own terms reflects a feminist positionality in its truest sense: a skepticism about the transparency of texts and objects of study, an inquiry into dynamics of power in scholarly approaches, and a refusal to assume an authoritative stance over another’s creation or personhood. Hmong experience is tangled and intricately stitched, much like the story cloths themselves.

HmongEmbroidery.org is unique in that it exhibits material culture—handmade, touchable, and culturally-inflected story cloths—through a virtual experience on the web. Material culture and textile scholars have long upheld the significance and meaning-making work of fabric arts. Scholars of needlework and textiles have established the “needle as an epistemic tool that exceeds the limits of an ocular fashion” (Daly Goggin 4). Needlework is more than a way of visual knowing, but also an embodied and affective way of knowing. Maureen Daly Goggin explains how feminist turns in material culture studies have allowed

...a space for exploring meaning-making activities that extend our gaze beyond text-centric objects. In turning attention to the various kinds of artifacts women have made, used, and collected as well as the tools they have used to create objects, scholars in material culture have carved a space for rethinking what counts as epistemic evidence and who counts in our investigations (33).

One might argue that digitization of the story cloths on HmongEmbroidery.org takes away from their materiality and decentralizes—or even dehumanizes—the story cloths themselves. However, exhibiting the story cloths in the digital realm opens a multi-dimensional way of knowing that exhibits both older and newer technologies. Pairing materiality with virtuality produces a multi-dimensional learning and analytical experience for viewers. In many ways, this experience only heightens the humanist aspects of HmongEmbroidery.org. Viewers from around the world can access and reflect upon Hmong experience at their own pace and in a private space, such as the home, as opposed to a public museum, where they can feel comfortable with affective responses and bodily sensations while engaging with the textiles. This is certainly not to say that public museums are somehow less important than virtual ones. The point is that different viewing experiences in different spaces offer different human responses. In some ways, viewing digitized artifacts in private space can be more intimate and definitely more conducive to close analysis through writing. As prominent digital humanities scholar Marisa Parham says, “Digital life has humanist dimensions” (Dinsman). In fact, Parham goes so far as to say that “technology is nothing but humanness” (Dinsman). Moreover, the “digital can be an instrument of dissemination and interactivity for public engagement” (Dinsman). HmongEmbroidery.org works through multiple dimensions to recover and archive Hmong story cloths that exhibit and account for Hmong experience across several centuries. It is an instrument allowing for access, exposure, engagement, and interaction with Hmong culture to a Hmong and non-Hmong international audience via the web.

Hmong History and Experience in Story Cloths

Much Hmong history is recorded in story cloths, a fact especially important considering that written records of Hmong experience are sparse. As Kou Yang explains, when Hmong began writing in their newly created alphabet, they transitioned “from a pre-literate to literate society,” which resulted in many historiographies of Hmong experience, including those written by non-Hmong (3). Kou Yang asserts that “because of the lack of records and reliable information needed to construct a more accurate version of Hmong history, these various accounts are often based on hearsay, oral accounts, legends or Biblical stories” (3). Here, Kou Yang laments the lack of written documents accounting for Hmong history. Certainly, written history accounts often provide a clarity and sense of validity. At the same time, oral accounts and alternate records of experience,

such as the story cloths, can offer rich and meaningful accounts. In putting the story cloths into conversation with traditional records of Hmong history, we can account for Hmong experience in new ways.



Figure 3. Artist unknown. Created between 1980s-1990s. 85x125 cm.

Records of Hmong life date back as early as 2300 B.C. in what is now China. Often characterized as an indigenous people, the Hmong do not have a homeland due to recurring persecution, exile, and displacement. In the nineteenth century, and possibly before, the Hmong were pushed by the Chinese into what is now Thailand, Laos and Vietnam.¹¹ There, they resided in the mountainous, rugged land, farming rice and corn, pigs and chickens. HmongEmbroidery.org displays an image of a story cloth depicting pre-1900 Hmong exile from China and their survival into the Vietnam War era (fig. 3). The Mekong River is the focal point of this story cloth, as its color resonates with the greyish mountain-like triangles bordering the scenes. In this story cloth, the Mekong both partitions and amalgamates Hmong temporalities. By this, I mean that Chinese Qing soldiers are depicted in the upper left hand corner, chasing Hmong out of China into Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand. This history would have occurred in the mid-1800s, when tens of thousands of Hmong were massacred, their land taken by soldiers. Yet, in the upper right hand corner, on the other side of the river, we see Long Cheng, a US CIA military base, built in 1964.

¹¹ There are quite a few discrepancies about Hmong history. I rely mostly on the work of Hmong scholar Kou Yang's article, "Commentary: Challenges and Complexity in the Re-Construction of Hmong History," for my data.

Right below the big, white military plane, just below the military base, is the town of Vientiane. Xai S. Lor writes that the tower structure there is The Patuxai Arch, which celebrates Laotian independence from France in 1954. Under Vientiane, the Mekong divides it from a Thai refugee camp, which would have existed between 1975-1999, a span of almost twenty-five years (Lee Lor). The Mekong is generally significant in Hmong accounts of The Secret War because it had to be crossed in order to reach the Thai refugee camps. To the left of that camp, we see a white airplane and the depiction of the Bangkok airport, which allowed some Hmong to seek out homes in other countries, such as the United States and Australia. This story cloth illustrates a span of over one hundred years of Hmong life, and while the Hmong move from site to site, through various time periods within the embroidery, they remain clothed in the same black tops with pink sashes. In these ways, Hmong experience is always contiguous and enduring, like the ever-flowing Mekong. At the same time, like the waves and rocks of a river, Hmong experience has been tumultuous. The river appears the widest in separating Vientiane, a town woven with colorful houses, from the refugee camps in Thailand. Here, the river sequesters Hmong homes from Hmong refugee camps, indicating the gap between dwelling and exile, and the end of an era. This story cloth relays Hmong displacement across time and space. Simultaneously, it tells a story of Hmong life and life-making. There are women watering their vividly-colored crops—red, yellow, pink and green—birds that might be raised for food, men cooking over a fire, and water, carried by a woman from the river. Though Hmong experience has been winding like the river and under threat, as we see through the embroidered soldiers and weapons, the story cloth depicts Hmong survival and strength at the same time that it depicts threats to Hmong life.

As detailed as the story cloths are, and as much as HmongEmbroidery.org's current interface works to exhibit them, the finely sewn intricacies of the scenes and embroidered human faces are lost in fuzzy digital pixels. In user-experiences like these, it becomes obvious how better material support for HmongEmbroidery.org could not only enhance user-experiences, but also more fully account for Hmong displacement, survival, and assistance given to United States forces during Vietnam. Some humanities scholars fear that material support for project-type scholarship that works outside of interpretive methods only contributes to the neoliberal agenda which Allington et al. explain. However, it seems unlikely that having better digital tools to access and examine HmongEmbroidery.org's exhibits would contribute to neoliberal agendas. If anything, closer examination and study of Hmong story cloths and a wider viewing audience would only make possible more humanities scholarship on the subject, as well as perform important ethical work in acknowledging Hmong experience during Vietnam. Indeed, Hmong diaspora has not only been obscured in written histories, but remains somewhat obscured in the visual, digitized realm largely due to lack of material support for the resources needed to acknowledge it. The benefit of a digital realm is to allow for off-site and even international access. Moreover, the digitization of HmongEmbroidery.org's story cloths with the appropriate tools, such as a high-resolution zoom option, would allow for closer and more complex observations of Hmong experience recorded in the story cloths. The quality of the digital space of HmongEmbroidery.org is critical and important in advancing the study of Hmong story cloths and making them more accessible to a wider viewing public.

Hmong support for and sacrifice to the United States during the Vietnam War has been largely unrecognized and unappreciated. In the late 1950s, the Hmong, largely living in Laos at that time, had to take sides with either the United States CIA or communist forces. Hmong writer Kao Kalia Yang explains in her memoir *The Latecomer* that "The communist Pathet Lao soldiers and their North Vietnamese allies infiltrated Hmong villages and began a systematic

campaign to kill off the Hmong who believed in the tenets of democracy and had fought against communist rule” (7). Hmong men and boys were recruited by the CIA, who worked with General Vang Pao and who trained over sixty thousand soldiers, some only children (Lloyd-George). Kao Kalia Yang explains this as the “biggest covert operation in CIA history” (7), which is why Hmong call it “The Secret War.” The Americans pulled out of the region in 1974-1975, leaving the Hmong unprotected against the Pathet Lao. Thousands of Hmong crossed the Mekong River into Thai refugee camps under the protection of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Uncountable others were massacred.

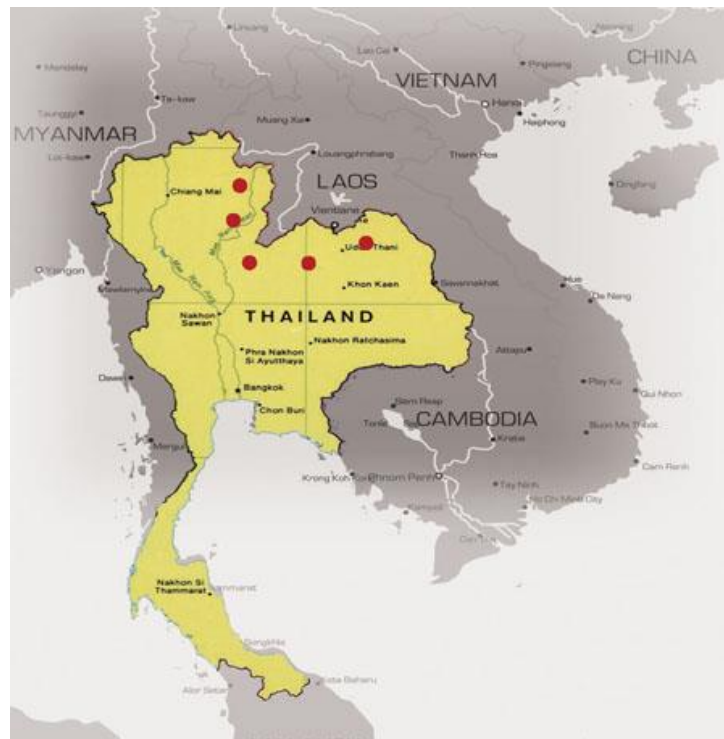


Figure 4. Map of International Aide and Refugee Camps. Used with permission from the HmongStory40 Project, who created the map especially for their project.

For Hmong who survived the war, Thai refugee camps provided little respite. The camps were scenes of violence, sickness, and hunger. As indicated earlier, Ban Vinai Refugee camp is shown in the lower right hand corner on one story cloth (fig. 1), while another depicts busses and a line of refugees waiting to be exported (fig. 3). Again, it is most likely that both cloths were created in a refugee camp or that their makers resided in one for a time. These representations of Hmong refugee camps are an important part of HmongEmbroidery.org’s work in accounting for Hmong displacement and registering losses during the Secret War. Lee Lor experienced the Thai refugee camps for fifteen years. He writes:

In the refugee camps, I saw refugees beaten by Thai guards and imprisoned for the slightest infraction. Camp guards were trained to be aggressive and pugnacious, ready to punch and kick the refugees at any moment. On some occasions, killing and raping happened as well. Refugees were deprived of all human rights. To this day the Hmong refugees carry the bitter tears of blood and torture at the hands of Thai guards (Lor 25).

Lor estimates that up to 200,000 Hmong lived in the camps for over twenty years, until most camps closed in the 1990s. Over 100,000 Hmong died.

The Vietnam War remains a fraught moment in American history for many reasons, and the United States generally forgets and denies the exploitation of the Hmong people during this period and long before it. Though over 275,000 Hmong live in the United States today, most Americans know little about their experience—or even know who the Hmong are as a people. In addition to curating and making embroidered stories of Hmong displacement and survival virtually accessible, HmongEmbroidery.org works as a pedagogical tool for non-Hmong to learn about Hmong culture, as well as for Hmong to learn more about themselves. In this way, HmongEmbroidery.org invites public engagement and interest in Hmong culture. There are understudied aspects of Hmong survival, endurance, and narrative woven within the Hmong story cloths. The story cloths operate as vessels for Hmong historical and cultural memory of the Secret War.

In *Weavings of War: Fabrics of Memory*, Ariel Zeitlin Cooke explains that “the new pictorial form of Hmong textile was born in Ban Vinai, a U.N. refugee camp in northern Thailand, after the fall of Saigon in 1975, and the fashion of these novel ‘story cloths’ quickly spread to all the Hmong refugee camps throughout Thailand” (16). Despite the prevalence of story cloths in refugee camps that Cooke describes, few interviews with story cloth artists have been recorded. One story cloth artist, Pang Xiong Sirirathasuk Sikoun, whose work is not exhibited on HmongEmbroidery.org, remembers her experience of embroidering in Ban Vinai as a chance to make money and to express herself with other women. Cooke records Sikoun’s memories of sewing and sorrow. Sikoun says that she and her fellow refugees “could not forget the things that had happened to us. Many times when the women were sewing they would cry” (Cooke 68). Sikoun recalls that “One woman I know, she had a new baby. And the people she was traveling with said, ‘Your baby is crying too much, it’s too dangerous.’ So they put a cloth over the baby’s face and it died...How [do] you ever get over that? It is always with you” (Cooke 68). As Sikoun’s account reveals, the story cloths archive Hmong trauma and loss across generations. Through embroidery, Hmong women, and sometimes men, accounted for their plight in a way that can be seen, touched, and passed on. Mary Louise Buley-Meissner explains how her twenty-first-century Hmong women students interact with Hmong story cloths created by their mothers and grandmothers, and even create their own story cloths, “stitching the fabric of Hmong lives together across generations” (254). In this way, Hmong story cloths transmit cross-generational histories, working to preserve their own accounts of Hmong experience, as opposed to colonial or damaging representations.

The cross-generational value of the story cloths is well-reflected in the story cloths exhibited on HmongEmbroidery.org. A noticeable aspect of many of the story cloths is their attention to children. Several cloths depict babies and children. This attention to children is not surprising. Anne Fadiman, author of *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, an ethnographic study of a Hmong child with epilepsy, writes that Hmong believe that, “the life-souls of newborn babies are especially prone to disappearance, since they are so small, so vulnerable, and so precariously poised between the realm of the unseen, from which they have just traveled, and the realm of the living” (10).¹² HmongEmbroidery.org does not allow Hmong babies and children to disappear, and instead remembers them in their vulnerability to an international viewing public

¹² Fadiman’s book was received by Hmong with mixed reviews. Though her work might have flaws in some aspects of Hmong cultural specificity, her insights on child care and her citation of studies on Hmong motherhood are helpful.

through digital media. In this way, viewers can take care to notice and acknowledge Hmong infancy and childhood, especially that of those who suffered during multiple persecutions and displacement. The story cloth pictured in figure one has what appears to be two babies and two children being cared for by their mothers as they flee from Yellow Rain and enemy soldiers. The story cloth pictured in figure three shows a child and baby on a father's back in line for asylum. Again, if HmongEmbroidery.org were to receive more funding, perhaps a zoom-in function would allow for a closer examination of these embroidered persons. HmongEmbroidery.org also features story cloths created by children. A 2012 story cloth book featuring both Lao and English language by a child, Ziang Yaj, from Laos, depicts the joy and love of a Hmong family, which in this case includes an animal (fig. 5). Fadiman describes in her book the special attentiveness and engagement that the Hmong value in caring for their children, citing a University of Minnesota study finding that Hmong mothers are markedly “more sensitive, more accepting, and more responsive, as well as ‘exquisitely attuned’ to their children’s signals” than their Caucasian counterparts (22). HmongEmbroidery.org also displays brightly colored embroidered Hmong baby carriers. Xai S. Lor explains that the bright colors of the baby carriers traditionally work to trick evil spirits who may harm a baby into thinking that the babies are birds.

One of the most popular books about Hmong story cloths is in fact a beautifully illustrated children’s book called *Dia’s Story Cloth*, by Dia Cha and illustrated by Chue and Nhia Thao Cha. Through the display of story cloths made by children, as well as story cloths illustrating the protection of children, HmongEmbroidery.org demonstrates Hmong valuing of children and the trans-generational quality of story cloths.



Figure 5. Ziang Yaj. 2012. 14x17 cm.

Hmong scholars like Mai Na M Lee caution against one-dimensional characterizations of the Hmong, speaking to the complexity of Hmong experience and how they have been stigmatized and stereotyped by others: “By examining just a few sources, we can see that Hmong culture, politics, history, and Hmong character represent a complex mosaic” (13). In many ways, HmongEmbroidery.org and the story cloths themselves perform this work of representing Hmong experience as a complex mosaic in the digital realm. The story cloths themselves are made from various fabrics, colors, and threads. They depict multiple experiences and narratives that are often difficult or impossible to interpret, and through HmongEmbroidery.org, they can be viewed, encountered, and contemplated over by people around the world. Moreover, the virtual exhibits portray Hmong life over several decades and even centuries, and across continents.



Figure 6. Unknown artist. 1980s-1990s. 78x86cm.

Like many indigenous cultures, Hmong culture—as understood in the scholarly field—is bound up in Western notions and ideologies due to colonial and hegemonic writings of history. Although early scholars asserted that “Hmong means free,” Mai Na M Lee explains that this characterization of the Hmong only sensationalizes their struggle. The meaning of the word “Hmong” has been a longstanding debate in Hmong studies. Though some scholars use the term “Miao” as synonymous with “Hmong,” Lee shows that “Miao” is actually a general Chinese word for barbarian that has been applied to Hmong people by scholars and colonizing powers. As Lee explains, Hmong were stereotyped by Chinese as an inferior, amoral race. Some Hmong sought to reclaim their identity through maintaining that “Hmong means free.” However, Lee remains skeptical of this claim, explaining how its roots seem to lie in the colonization and exploitation of Hmong people:

At a deeper historical level, the phrase ‘Hmong means free’ cannot be taken for granted because stereotypes of the Hmong as an aggressively warlike and independent people have long overshadowed other positive and perhaps more

important cultural and social values. This image of the Hmong as a people who time and time again refused the persuasions of civilization originates from Chinese and colonial sources. (5)

Lee goes on to show how the Hmong have been stereotyped over and over again as a one-dimensional, war-like people who cannot find a way to exist within mainstream civilization. Working against such narratives, HmongEmbroidery.org shows Hmong life with more nuance: though the Hmong certainly are a strong people, their resiliency is not limited to warfare. One story cloth on the virtual museum depicts the Hmong New Year, a joyful celebration encompassing Hmong capacity for traditional foods, blessings, romance, and games (see fig. 6). Xai S. Lor explains in the caption that the story cloth depicts a pov pob (ball tossing) game, where “young people, thinking about marriage, form two lines and toss the courtship balls back and forth throughout the New Year days, flirting and singing folk songs to prospective spouses.” Again, this story cloth features the gray and blue triangle pattern, situating the scene in a mountainous region. HmongEmbroidery.org celebrates the joy and traditions of Hmong life, making such aspects of Hmong experience known to a wide audience through digital media.

In Asian American scholarship, as well as in Western and Asian cultures, the Hmong are often lumped together with other Asian ethnicities. The story cloths on HmongEmbroidery.org work against homogenizing narratives about the Hmong through their portrayal of Hmong-specific dress and design. The Hmong sometimes identify with a certain group of Hmong, such as Green Hmong, Blue Hmong, Striped Hmong, and White Hmong. Some HmongEmbroidery.org story cloths depict the affiliations and dress of various Hmong groups, as well as the mountainous landscape of their origins. One such story cloth exhibits a Green Hmong woman wearing the traditional black or indigo skirt, accompanied by red, green, blue, and yellow embroidery and applique (see fig. 7). The triangle pattern on the outside create a mountainous aesthetic.



Figure 7. By Yer Lo. 1980s. 31x30cm.

As a large number of Hmong have found homes and communities in the United States, after their displacement from Laos, Vietnam, Thailand and China, some story cloths display their migration and engagement with American culture. Minneapolis-Saint Paul, Minnesota is the

home of over sixty-six thousand Hmong. Especially in Saint Paul, Hmong culture and life are celebrated through festivals, school activities, and art. One HmongEmbroidery.org story cloth created by Yong Sa Vang displays a waxing method called “batik” to illustrate two loons (fig. 8). The loon is the state bird of Minnesota. Though the edging design on this story cloth is markedly Hmong, the loons are markedly Minnesotan.



Figure 8. By Yong Sa Vang. 1992. 25x31cm.

For all of the important work HmongEmbroidery.org performs in preserving, exhibiting and promoting interaction with Hmong culture in digital ways, there is still much work to be done. In order for HmongEmbroidery.org to continue to exhibit and produce new meanings for and about the Hmong, it needs material support. As scholars worry about allocations of funds—and rightfully so—some may feel ambivalent about digital museums and studies of digital museums, like this one. Others might contend that digital work makes the humanities more relevant in the twenty-first century. However, the humanities is, always has been, and always will be relevant. What digitization often does is make humanities work more accessible, and HmongEmbroidery.org is a perfect example of this. This essay has demonstrated that virtual museums can be important archives in “[registering] the losses” of displaced peoples (Love 386). HmongEmbroidery.org is an example of how such archives can generate inter-and-intra cultural conversations, allow for international access, and prompt more scholarship on experiences that might otherwise remain obscured by dominant social logics—like the American version of the Vietnam War. HmongEmbroidery.org is an excellent example of why we need digital museums to help us better understand, confront and face histories of displacement, like that of the Hmong. Moreover, HmongEmbroidery.org and its story cloths illuminate how interpretation can be a very poor and facile mode of study. While reading with unknowing is uncomfortable, a scholarly acknowledgement of unknowing nevertheless safeguards works of art from projections of our own “preexisting fantasies and ideologies,” as if they were screens (Felski 739). Certainly, Hmong story cloths are richer and deeper than screens, and we should take care to treat them as such.

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